

## Betwixt and Between: The Cult of Living Saints in Contemporary Bulgaria (1)

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(with photos by Petko Ivanov)

The exemplary persona of Christianity known as the saint is a junction of antinomies: “hereness” and “thereness”, immanence and transcendence, familiarity and incomprehensibility. In social terms, however, the saint is above all the figure of a religious virtuoso emerging at the interface of official and popular religion.(2) Various hagiolatric communities, from loosely defined local groups to well organized religious societies and sects, constantly cultivate their religious specialists who are often dubbed “saints” and treated as saints while still alive. Such holy persons, aspiring for saintly status in their lifetime who have not been canonized by the official Church, are usually designated in the scholarly tradition as ‘folk,’ ‘near-,’ ‘would-be,’ ‘living’ [see, e.g., Macklin and Margolies 1988], or in general not-quite-saints, to differentiate them from their canonized, “otherworldly” colleagues.

The majority of cases of modern folk saints (19th-20<sup>th</sup> c.) within Bulgarian hagiolatric communities are healers and clairvoyants sometimes called “living saints,” who only rarely enjoy popularity beyond the narrow scope of their initial local cults. Against this background of ephemeral and amorphous saints a few cases stand out as epitomizing the general tendencies of popular religious saint-making in Bulgaria: the miracle-maker of Silistra Angelush Trifonov (1827-after 1904), the Holy Virgin Korteza Khadzhiiska from Sliven (c.1873-after 1920), the prophet Bona Velinova from Grigorevo (1885-1960), the Venerable Stoina Dimitrova from the district of Melnik (1883-1933), and the most celebrated near-saint of present-day Bulgaria, the oracle from the town of Petrich Vanga Dimitrova (1911-1996). This study is based primarily on ethnographic data about them, (3) as well as on wide-ranging narrative material reflecting Bulgarian folk cosmological concepts.

Saints are analyzed here as cosmological agents of the communities that worship them and their status is compared and contrasted with the communal status of other cosmological figures, such as vampires or witches. Our approach is centered on the folk term “living saint” in an attempt to outline a structural profile of the saintly figure in Bulgarian popular religion from the viewpoint of the ethnography of speaking, that is, the study of speech episodes in their social context. The paper is built upon our trust in the capacity of folk terminology to manifest an insider’s understanding of folk phenomena. Its first, descriptive part, presents a case-study of the unofficial cult of the Venerable Stoina, as seen through the term “living saint” used in the cult. The second, analytical, part is an attempt to reconstruct the Bulgarian folk concept of living holiness that underlies the ostensibly divergent and often contradictory discourses about different living saints.

## I. THE SAINTLY CAREER OF A VILLAGE CLAIRVOYANT

*Zhiv svetets*, the exact Bulgarian equivalent of “living saint,” has two equally paradoxical usages in folk discourse. It is used not only for live local healers and clairvoyants but also for canonized saints with well-established Christian and folk cults. The term apparently encompasses two different metaphors with inverted tenors and vehicles: living saint vs. living saint. In the first metaphor the title “saint” which implies dead, or “very special dead” [Brown 1981: 69-85] is applied to living people; in the latter the presumably dead saint is presented as alive.(4)

When using the term *zhiv svetets*, however, the members of the folk communities we study do not differentiate between these two hidden metaphorical predications. Moreover, they do not seem to separate the two usages of the term. One can only assume that behind the confusing variety of folk locutions there exists an implicit yet uniform concept of living holiness. This concept is not immediately obvious to the outsider because folk communities tend to define their own terms through stories rather than through propositions. They do not conceive of a living saint as the sum total of his/her distinctive features but as a set of events. This is why the only way to reveal the implicit folk concept of living holiness is by analyzing the concrete events around a living saint as they are articulated in folk parlance.

The case of the Venerable Stoina of Sushitsa is particularly suitable for such a venture. Both before and after her death she has been venerated as a living saint by various folk communities in South-Western Bulgaria; she is believed to be a close associate of other “living saints” like St. George. The rich data that has been collected provides an abundance of locutions and narratives that comment on the concept of living holiness in its original folk context.(5)

### From Divine Election to Social Selection

Stoina Dimitrova was born on September 9, 1883 in the hamlet of Haznatar, Sérrai region (since 1913 part of Greece, where it is called Chrisohorapha). According to the legend, her birth was marked by a sign from God: a pigeon landed on her cradle signifying the beginning of an exceptional life. When she was seven, Stoina lost her sight. She contracted smallpox, and at the critical moment when her parents thought she was dying a terrible storm broke out. The door opened and the house was lit by an unbearable light. The child told her parents not to be afraid: St. George had come to visit her. That day she became permanently blind, but thanks to a gift from Heaven to the saint she was granted a different spiritual sight.(6)



*Vanga Dimitrova, Stoina's successor, receiving her call in a whirlwind (see note 17). [An icon from "St. Petka's" Church in Rupite, Petrich District.]*

When she turned sixteen she performed her first miracle: St. George appeared once again and told her to dig in the yard of her parents' house, where she discovered an icon of the saint with an icon-lamp. The village built a small chapel at the place of the discovery and Stoina started living there.

In 1913 (during the Balkan Wars) her relatives, like many other Bulgarian families from the region, migrated northwards, to the inner territories of the country.(7) Along the way Stoina parted with them forever and headed alone to the church of St. George in Sushitsa, following, as she explained, her call "to serve the saint." The church of Sushitsa is situated outside the village, in an isolated hilly place right next to the village cemetery. Stoina chose this space inhabited by saints and the dead, living there to the end of her days. At her request a small room was built for her in the upper level of the church, in the woman's section. Since there was no precedent in Bulgaria for people to live inside a church, this act of Stoina's alone marked her out as exceptional, not only in her own community, but in the tradition as a whole.

Everything in the daily routine of this extraordinary hermit woman was also unusual. She ate only communion bread and dressed like a nun only in black, although she never took the veil. Peasants from Sushitsa led her around the district to preach, and people came to her to confess their sins, as if she were a priest and not an illiterate woman. Above all, however, she was distinguished by her "gift from God," allowing her to see things beyond the range of normal. She recognized people "from their breathing," called total strangers by their names, knew without explanation why somebody was visiting her. People came to learn secrets from the past and events of the future, to get advice on communal or personal problems, or to satisfy their curiosity about the end of this world and life in the next.



*The "living" St. George guarding the entrance to Sushitsa's Church*

Stoina had all this "very special" knowledge because she was in constant contact with the transcendent; so people in Sushitsa still believe. Witnesses claim that she often talked with the saints who came to visit her. Especially important were her contacts with St. George. In the district they say she is the sister of St. George, thus interpreting Stoina's relation to the saints exclusively in kinship terms. Stoina not only communicated with the saints but also acted together with them, on numerous occasions miraculously saving "her village" from Turkish attack with the help of St. George. Many stories tell how she punished blasphemers, thieves and murderers with miracles of retribution, and this portrays her again as a protector of the community and its values.

The most celebrated gift Stoina possessed, her healing skill, was also attributed to her contacts with the saints. When sick people came to see her, she would talk to the icons and say what instructions she had been given by the saints. She practiced exclusively faith-healing, occasionally with the addition of herbal medicine and other folk

medicine methods. Her most frequent prescriptions were for the ill person to take Holy Communion in several (usually seven) particular churches, to sleep overnight in a church or a monastery, or simply to pray.

Protector, healer and clairvoyant, Stoina was respected as a holy person throughout the region around Sushitsa, and the system of patron-client relationship involving her spread. Knowledge about her extraordinary powers and abilities traveled around the country, although she never became the object of institutional propaganda and her worship was supported by purely folk mechanisms. Her vita relates that she was visited by many prominent people with different social backgrounds, including some political figures, “all of them coming to her in the firm belief that she was a living saint.”

#### Recurrent Near-Death Experiences

The most unusual events in Stoina’s life were her near-death experiences, that is recurrent experience of periods of clinical death. The narratives about these events closely follow the rich Bulgarian tradition of near-death folklore, which interprets apparent death as a journey to the Other World.(8) This tradition sees the dead-alive person as split into a subject traveling among the dead, and an apparently dead body remaining among the living. In accordance with this dichotomy near-death narratives are divided into, firstly, reports about an otherworldly experience by these visionary (*Ich-Erzählungen* or retellings), and, secondly, testimony about the concomitant events in this world.

Afterlife reports confirm the stereotypical folk vision of the Other World as a village where the dead live in families and neighborhoods, where the topography sometimes reminds the sojourner of the cemetery in his native village.(9) The righteous eat and drink what was brought to their graves during memorial services, while sinners sit hungry to one side. This segregation is often further elaborated in terms of the Christian distinction between Heaven and Hell. The folk texts recounting Stoina’s impressions of the Other World do not deviate from this standard vision. In fact, they so closely match other folk narratives that it must remain unclear whether Stoina really related them, or they were ascribed to her as a consequence of cultural inertia.

The testimonies about events surrounding Stoina’s near-death experiences center round a circumstance which preceded them, when the saint notified the village that she would die, and gave strict orders not to bury her, because she would “revive” in seven days time. When she then “died” in accordance with her prediction, the village of Sushitsa faced a dangerous situation created by the undefined status of her body: a corpse which might be alive. (Usually near-death experiences happen unexpectedly and the person resuscitates barely in time to halt his own funeral.) Public opinion was split between two equally risky alternatives. Not to bury a corpse in a timely and proper manner would mean doing nothing to prevent death’s invasion into the world of the living [cf. Tilney 1970]. To disobey the orders of the saint, however, would mean provoking her rage and resulting in the village being punished. Finally the peasants adopted a policy of compromise. They did not initiate preparations for the funeral, but they took preliminary measures to protect themselves from Stoina’s potentially dead body: they locked it up in her room to isolate it from the living and to keep animals from jumping over it, which would mean it turned into a vampire.

Although the suggestion that Stoina be buried was intended to defend the traditional order, it is now retrospectively interpreted as doubt in her holiness that disgraces not only those who supported it, but even their descendants. The general tendency in all the folk material about this first near-death episode is to present it as the ultimate proof of Stoina's prophetic and thaumaturgic powers, and, consequently, as the event that confirmed conclusively the social recognition of her saintliness.

Naturally enough given her proven abilities Stoina knew exactly when and how she would die. The unsurprising prediction about her death was simply the final sign of her being one of "the very special living" and, simultaneously, the first indication of her joining the ranks of "the very special dead." (10) She died on December 22, 1933 in her room inside St. George's Church in Sushitsa and was buried in a special place next to the church. Her funeral is remembered in the district as an exceptional event. "It wasn't like other times. Many people and several priests came. The village priest made a speech. 'She was a holy woman,' he said. 'This woman was like Our Lord for us. Now our life is gone.'"

#### The Posthumous Cult and Its Impresarios

The death of Stoina coincided with a period of general decline in the village and the district as a whole. Especially after World War II small frontier settlements were gradually abandoned by younger people and fell into oblivion. The Sushitsa priest died in 1942 and was never replaced. The small church and the tomb of Stoina in its yard became as desolate as the village itself. All the consequences of sociopolitical change in the country were interpreted by the people in the district as resulting from Stoina's death. The community's patron saint had died and now the district was unprotected and forgotten. "After her death," our informants keep saying, "they forgot about us." This undefined "they" means the authorities, both secular and divine. Thus the temporary forgetting about Stoina is seen as another miracle, negatively emphasizing her patronage.

"The saint, however, did not let herself and her holy deeds be completely forgotten," reads her vita. In the 1980s she started "appearing" in the dreams of various people in the district with specific instructions: to restore her tomb, bring people there and write her vita. The folk veneration of Stoina began to mushroom.



*Venerable Stoina's Old and New Gravestones*

The Tomb. Her tomb became a focus of special attention. A new gravestone was ordered, the sexton began to light the lamp on the grave on the eve of Sundays and, more importantly, church holidays and commemoration feasts began to be organized at the tomb on the dates of Stoina's birth and death. Pilgrims regularly come to the tomb to light candles and leave gifts (mainly food), and take some earth from it away with them, believing it to possess curative powers, and often carrying it in a small bag as an amulet.



The insane are brought there to sleep overnight at the tomb -- a common therapeutic practice for insanity, conventionally associated in folk tradition with the shrines of established Christian saints.(11)

Various miracles have happened at Stoina's tomb signifying her posthumous saintly status. According to her vita a halo may appear around it, with Stoina herself "seen" coming out of the grave to cure pilgrims. Those who are disrespectful to the tomb are severely punished. Soon after she passed away two men tried to destroy her tomb "out of primitive atheism." One of them immediately became insane; the other one later died by accident. "You must not attempt to harm a saint," concludes the account of the episode in the vita instructively, "because God punishes you according to your deeds."



*Two icons of the Venerable Stoina, the second for sale at € 200*

### The Icons.

Another object of intense veneration is the other indication of Stoina's recent physical presence: her icons. The oldest was painted during Stoina's lifetime. One legend even claims that the blind woman painted it herself, adding a miraculous flavor to the act of its creation, thus supporting belief in its thaumaturgic powers. Another is the gift of a grateful artist whose child was cured by the saint from beyond the grave.

As a result of a veneration that was too active, the old icon was even set on fire by burning candles, but although it has now been singed in various places, it has lost neither its admirers nor its powers. A bottle of water is always kept close to the icons, as well as next to the icon of St. George downstairs, because people believe that when living saints come to visit, they may be thirsty. The sick sleep in the room under the icons "for their health." Pilgrims all test their righteousness by trying to stick coins on the surface of the icons: if the coin adheres, the person is thought to be righteous, if not, then he is a sinner.(12)

Photographs of the icons are widely distributed among believers. They are placed on the iconostases of many churches side by side with the icons of canonized saints and are included on many domestic iconostases together with the family's patron saints.

### The Vita.

The most essential element in the spontaneously developing folk cult of Stoina is her vita. At the beginning of the 1980s, Zoia Velikova, the granddaughter of Stoina's sister, began to have numerous dreams about her great aunt. Zoia interpreted this repetitive dream as a series of visions through which she was given an important message: Stoina is a saint and the sister of St. George, and she, Zoia, has been "chosen" to write the vita of her saintly relative under direct instructions from her.



*The Vita of the Venerable Stoina from the City of Sérrai, published 1998*

Zoia is a genuinely religious woman in her seventies who lives in Petrich, a town close to Sushitsa. She often gets together with other pious elderly women from the town. They visit churches and monasteries, read and exchange popular religious texts, mainly contemporary redactions of medieval apocrypha like *Epistoliiia za nedeliata* (Epistula de die dominica), *Suniat na Bogoroditsa* (Somnus Deiparae), etc.(13)

After being inspired by her dreams, Zoia, together with two other women from her circle, Elena Khadzhiiiova and Verka Veleva, started to record legends about Stoina: testimony to her sanctity. All the stories circulating about the saint of Sushitsa form in their totality her folk hagiography. The three "hagiographers" simply put together different bits and pieces of it in a flexible open structure and named this first text *Zhitieto na Prepodobna Stoina* [The Vita of the Venerable Stoina]. The vita itself reveals the mechanism of its creation: "What we have written has been recorded from many people, even as we were traveling through the countryside, and whatever people tell us, that we write down." The process of recording various stories is

present also in the structure of the text, in the middle of which there is a typical vita conclusion, after which various episodes are added by agglutination regardless of chronological order.

The expansion, rewriting and revision of the vita continued and is still in progress. The picture is especially complicated because different copies/variants show various degrees of deviation one from the other. Some of them add new episodes; others redistribute already existing ones, thus presenting compositional variants with only slight stylistic changes; in a third group stylistic changes are substantial, and so on. Most copies dating from the 1980s were made by Verka and Elena, but nowadays there are numerous second and third "generation" variants. In a manuscript tradition of this kind copies proliferate exponentially and the changes in the resulting texts are not only unpredictable but also synchronically impossible to view as a whole. What is observable, however, is the actual process of the folk creation of a hagiographical text, which can retrospectively illuminate similar medieval phenomena about which we only occasionally possess any data.(14)



*"Prepodobna [Venerable] Stoina"*  
Bottled Mineral Water

All the available variants reveal the deliberate intention to follow the hagiographical canon, although they are far from being paragons of the genre. The later copies reflect a tendency to increase the cohesion of the text by following more closely the chronology of related events, by introducing leitmotifs (e.g. the perceptible accumulation of vocabulary based on the Slavic root \*svet-, "light"), and by framing the episodes with admonitory formulae borrowed from the language of the liturgy. The text not only describes itself as a *zhitie* [vita], but also functions as one. It is read aloud as a sermon by priests at Stoina's tomb on her commemoration days as well as after the Holy Liturgy in St. George's Church in the town of Petrich. The elderly women from Zoia's circle also often read it aloud when they meet, always making the sign of the cross before the reading, as

they would with any sacred text. Like many medieval vitae, the ultimate intention behind the text is to make the claim for canonization. This intention is declared openly in one of the marginal notes of the initial variant of the vita: "To be canonized."

#### The Management of the Cult.



*The model of the new monastery and bank account details  
for donations (Demokratsia Newspaper, 1995)*

In the 1990s, following the fall of communism, the cult underwent the first stages of institutionalization.<sup>(15)</sup> Nowadays, a local tourist agency provides accommodation for the numerous pilgrims to Sushitsa, and organizes and advertises the services, followed by ritual eating and drinking at the tomb. New copies/variants of the vita and photographs of the saint's icons are being disseminated throughout Bulgaria, and a short version of the vita with the blessing of a local priest from Petrich has been published in booklet form. The cult industry also includes a range of newly painted icons available to the religious souvenir market for up to €200 each, and local entrepreneurs have rushed to cash in on Stoina's popularity by selling bottled mineral water named after her and advertised as a "Kiss from Paradise."

The growing popularity of the cult finally reached the leading national newspapers, both secular and religious, where a number of accounts, both pro and contra Stoina's as saint, were published. Political parties



began showing interest in the cult, resulting in a nationwide fund for the restoration of St. George's Church in Sushitsa and the construction of a new monastery complex around it. This initiative was advertised as "our patriotic duty" to "preserve this holy Bulgarian place," which in its turn will assist "the spiritual revival of the Bulgarians" as well as their "campaign against sects mushrooming in the country." (16) The reconstruction began in 1996 with the reburial of Stoina in a splendid new sepulchre, while the building of the new monastery is still in progress.



A Web-Page Promoting "Wine Tours" in the Melnik District

Thus the veneration of the "living saint of Sushitsa," initially restricted exclusively to its local folk milieu, not only gradually acquired all the elements of an Eastern Orthodox cult (veneration of the tomb, pilgrimages, feast days, icons, hagiographical texts), but also began to be used manipulatively in the socio-political life of the country.

## II. LIVING HOLINESS IN ITS FOLK INTERPRETATION

The key term "living saint represents the most concise articulation of folk respect for the Venerable Stoina both in her lifetime when she acted as a local *vrachka* (clairvoyant and healer) in the region of Petrich, (17) and after her death when she acquired the major characteristics of a Christian saint. Her case thus unites the two groups of living saints that we have isolated for analytical purposes: healers and clairvoyants from the world of the living, and saints from the world of the dead. The material about her cult, therefore, offers an analytical perspective for revealing the common characteristics of the two groups that motivate their designation using a single folk term.

Two broader folk categories, that of sainthood and of life and death, corresponding to the two components of the metaphorical term, underlie the folk narratives about the Venerable Stoina and other living saints. Equally they challenge the insider's preconceptions and require further elucidation.

### A Saint In Need Is A Saint Indeed

Official hagiography presents saints as figures of an inner duality modeled on the principal dichotomy of the Christian universe. It counterposes two apparently incompatible aspects of saintliness: the intrinsic quality of being a saint, the result of divine election, and the transformational process of becoming a saint, the result of reproducing a series of exemplary acts. Thus only official Christianity offers simultaneously in the one

person a locus of miraculous power for support, and a paradigm of Christian behavior for imitation [cf. Cunningham 1980: 13ff].

Popular religion views sainthood exclusively in terms of divine election [cf. Sternberg 1925]: saints are chosen, they do not become. That is why in folk hagiography holy people may act as saints straightaway, the narratives about their miracles completely replacing the ecclesiastical review of the exemplary biography. This folk identity of saints solely as thaumaturgic agents also determines the type of hagiolatric communication in the folk milieu. Saints are viewed as figures of communal and personal support, as numinous helpers in time of crisis when only a miracle can restore the habitual order of life. Thus the complexities of their official Christian cult is reduced mainly to a patron-client agreement based on the principle of reciprocity: “veneration for help already received,” or, in its more profane variant, “give-and-take.”

Religious figures in Bulgarian popular religion<sup>(18)</sup> generally emerge as outstanding figures in their communities through a miraculous event, involving direct contact with the Other World, which is interpreted as a sign of their divine election and commonly articulated in folk discourse by the topos *bogova darba* [a gift from God]. In slightly different terms we may say that saint-making in popular religion is a process of recognizing divine election through social selection. The hagiolatric communities select their saints from among people who have publicly demonstrated their charisma, i.e. their divine gifts, of which curative and clairvoyant skills are the most typical. These qualities are attributed to the constant communication of living holy people with the Other World. Local healers and clairvoyants are believed to act under the immediate instruction and guidance of otherworldly saints and to work together with them for the welfare of the community. Thus living saintly people and long dead canonized saints, their different status in the eyes of the Church notwithstanding, do in fact share a common clientele and a common patron status in hagiolatric communities.

The heterogeneous group of earthly and heavenly numinous helpers in a given community has its own local hierarchy, which has little to do with the ecclesiastical rationale for their reputation, or its lack thereof. The place of the saints in the hierarchy of local religion is determined by their efficacy as proven by successful precedents, and by their activeness demonstrated in a variety of “apparitions” understood broadly as otherworldly intrusion into this world [cf. Christian 1981]. Successful precedents and apparitions govern both the local views about the saints’ specialization and the rituals for choosing personal or family saints, and patrons of churches and territorial or ethnic communities.<sup>(19)</sup>

The most famous saints in local religion receive the title “living,” an epithet, which if interpreted literally appears infelicitous, because it is awkwardly redundant in the case of those still alive and oxymoronic in the case of canonized saints. Its usage suggests that in this context “living” implies an additional quality directly related to the efficacy of their service to the community and the process of their social evaluation and hierarchization.

All the references to living saints in our material occur at the climax of narratives about holy figures, in which they have demonstrated their protection of communal values with maximum intensity. Thus one of the most popular legends about the Venerable Stoina included in her vita tells how she and St. George miraculously

saved her village of Dolna Sushitsa from being set on fire by a Turkish military squad. At the decisive moment St. George, on horseback, jumps out of the fresco above the church door to join Stoina in her single-handed resistance to the Turks. The narrative usually concludes with the exclamation: “Stoina is the sister of St. George. He is a living saint, and she is one too!”(20) Saints like St. George, St. Minas or St. John of Rila are commonly “seen” or “heard” walking in churches dedicated to them and their “corporeal” presence is otherwise registered across the territory of Bulgaria. It is not mere chance that it is precisely these saints who are credited with being “national guardians,” *svettsi-granichari* [protectors of the state’s frontier].(21) The icons of a living saint can be no less active, as the term *zhiva kuna* (living icon) demonstrates:(22) they can move, cry, heal and actively communicate with those who come to them for help. If other, “non-living” saints are saints only *in potentio* for the community, living saints are saints *in praesentio*. The others “remain on their icons,” we were told, but living saints “come out” of them to be part of the community through their actions, healing and protecting. Thus the modifier “living” emphasizes the immediate presence of the saints, their capacity to be perceived as acting within their hagiolatric communities.

This explains why the living saint is not a category fixed to a particular group of saints once and for all, but rather a conditional term designating a mobile and open group of community religious helpers. Saints are living when they are immediate benefactors in the here and now, and only so long as their activity remains beneficent for the community. If they stop being of help, the reverence displayed towards them is promptly replaced by veneration of one of their more efficient colleagues. Moreover, the community is expected to apply sanctions against “useless” saints, since they have violated the patron-client agreement. In this case canonized saints are ritually “punished” by hitting and breaking their icons(23) and expelling them from the village, just as “holy” clairvoyants and healers are publicly exposed as pseudo-saints, charlatans or witches.

We can conclude that the epithet “living” as an axiological modifier of the title “saint” is used in folk discourse not as an antonym of “dead,” but as a synonym of “acting” or “in use” (cf. the similar functions of this epithet in other folk set phrases like *zhiva voda*, “living water,” *zhiv vŭglen* “living charcoal,” *zhiv diavol* “living devil,” etc.). Its usage presupposes a functional distinction between active (useful) and passive (useless) saints that in popular religion replaces the more abstract ecclesiastical distinction between canonized and non-canonized saints.

#### The Living Saint As Liminal Figure

The fluid group of living saints has an ambivalent position between this and the Other World. Their existential status challenges our modern common-sense understanding of life and death and of the relation between them. In the cosmological views of the communities that we study the worlds of the dead and of the living are two discrete yet isomorphous parts of a common socio-communicative system [cf. Garnizov 1986: 25-26]. After death people are still capable of helping and harming their living descendants. They appear in the dreams of the living to offer warnings or helpful advice, or cause hailstorms if they have been insulted by the behavior of their fellow villagers. In a similar manner the acts of the living in this world can facilitate or cause problems in the existence after death of their kinsmen, in-laws, and other social partners. Whatever is given in

this world for the dead (food, clothes, etc.), becomes available to them in the Other World. If, however, people in this world cry too much for a deceased relative, it rains there and bothers the dead. In other words, a village folk community consists to a degree both of its living members and their dead ancestors.(24)

Always interested in providing maximum harmony in social relations, communities cultivate this interdependence between their living and dead members. They ritually fortify the existential barrier between them and restrict their contacts to special liminal zones in order to neutralize any possible harmful consequences from intercourse between the living and the dead. These are the spatial zone of the cemetery, which is believed to be in both this and the Other World, and the temporal zones of *zadushnitsa* [All Souls' Day] and the period from Easter to Pentecost when the dead are "dismissed" from Heaven for a family reunion [Marinov 1981: 561; cf. Georgieva 1985: 109-110].

Extraordinary members of the community, however, (healers, clairvoyants, witches and sorceresses among the living, saints and vampires among the dead) have the ability to cross the ultimate existential *limen* in both directions, something that places them between structures and beyond communal control. These "very special personas," if we may call them this, extending in a unorthodox manner Peter Brown's apt term [1981], are all "liminal figures" (liminars), liminality being interpreted here not as a particular state of transition, but rather as the potentiality to be betwixt and between [Turner 1969].

The "specialty" of the very special living is their ability if required to be present among the dead while they are still alive. Their near-death experiences can take various forms: clinical death or coma interpreted as a visit to Heaven and Hell; transitory death (witches are believed to be still-born and then to be brought back to life artificially),(25) possession, i.e. the "taking away" of living people by the dead (mandatory for both healers and sorceresses [Pócs 1989: 39-44]), metempsychosis (cf. the belief that every night the soul of a witch leaves her apparently dead body and travels as a butterfly [Marinov 1981: 308]). The passage from this world to the next is the ultimate expression of their liminality. It is the liminal period of transition from *neznanie* ("unknowingness," one of the folk terms for the near-death experience [Angelova 1948: 256]) to sacred knowledge. Reiterated through constant contact with the dead in a sort of a spiritual apprenticeship, it determines their extraordinary abilities: extrasensory perception, and power over disease, climate and fertility. Their transcendent experience is also linked to the presence of symbolic markers of death in their physical and social behavior, like blindness (clairvoyants), sterility or infertility, signs of physical decay like mold (witches), the use of "dead" or black entities in the practice of sorceresses (the water with which a corpse had been washed, eggs from a black hen, etc.).

The liminality of the very special dead is likewise manifested by their reappearance in this world. Unlike the ordinary dead they "return" to be among the living and this paradoxical existence between two worlds marks them with "life" qualities anomalous to their status of dead people: visibility, physical activity, the incorruptibility of their corpses (saints, vampires), their sexual potency and fertility (vampires).

From a functional viewpoint liminality is the ambivalent potentiality to help/harm beyond the restrictions of natural or social laws. Liminars thus exemplify with unprecedented intensity the ambiguity of the

life/death relationship that threatens the intended social harmony. In accordance with the principal ethical dualism of folk cosmology communities transform this problematic ambivalence by focusing positive liminal energy only onto certain liminars, conceived as helpers (saints, healers, clairvoyants) and the negative energy onto their alleged antagonists, the adversaries (vampires, demons, witches, sorceresses). The similar powers helpers and adversaries possess are attributed to the activity of antipodal forces (the divine gift vs. the Devil's work) and are interpreted antithetically. If both healers and sorceresses control disease, a healer cures people of them, while a sorceress inflicts them on others. Both saints and vampires tend to take revenge with terrifying cruelty, but vampires strike promiscuously, with no respect for justice and order, while saints punish in order to confirm the social structures for the benefit of the community as a whole. As a result of this interpretation the inherent amorphia of the liminal group is interiorized as a bipolar structure, and is sanctioned as such by corresponding paradigms of social interaction with it.

The functional classification of liminars into helpers and adversaries counterbalances the blurred dichotomy between the living and the dead. Helpers, as well as adversaries, act together across the existential border and the living members of each group are expected to join their otherworldly partners after death: witches and sorceresses are potential future vampires [Georgieva 1985: 111-112; Perkowski 1988: 451], just as healers and clairvoyants are presumed to be the heavenly saints-to-be. Such a classification presupposes unequivocal social behavior toward antipodal liminal agents. In the constellation of social links those deemed adversaries are *personae non grata*, communal felons, who are ostracized, persecuted and subjected to severe punishment.(26) According to communal norms both they and their clients are sinners, and that is why adversaries need to act secretly in secluded places and times. There is a tendency to eliminate these liminars forcibly from social structures, thus cleansing the community and reestablishing its threatened harmony. Helpers, on the contrary, are the focal points of the recurrent restoration of communal structures. Not only is their social status high, but the community itself gains prestige in the eyes of the outside world through them. They, and especially their vanguard, the living saints, are guarantees of social stability, prosperity and order, and their patronage is one of the most important ways of identifying the community as an autonomous social entity.

#### A Graphic Closure

Our analysis can be summarized in Figure 1 which represents the folk concept "living saint" as a

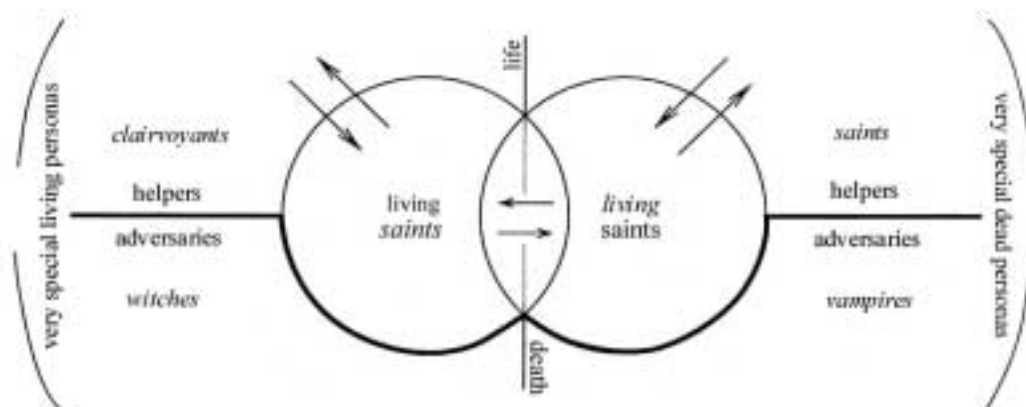


Figure 1



cross-section of four broader categories: the existential categories of living and dead, and the functional categories of helpers and adversaries.(27)

Based on a reconstruction of the context in which the term “living saint” operates, we have established that each of its two components has both functional and existential connotations. *Zhiv* can mean both “active” (functional) and “alive” (existential); *svetets* respectively, means “thaumaturgic helper” (functional) and “dead” or “having temporarily died” (existential). The term “living saint” as a functional designation, therefore, refers to the general characteristic of some very special living and dead folk agents to function as active helpers in their hagiolatric communities. At its existential register the term refers to the liminal status of these agents, which determines their capacity to act as otherworldly benefactors in this world.

#### NOTES

- 1 Preliminary versions of this article were read at the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conferences on Balkan and South Slavic Linguistics, Literature and Folklore, held at the University of Chicago (1992) and Indiana University (1994) respectively. A Bulgarian translation of the second part appeared in the special issue “Christianity and Folklore”(ed. Katia Mikhailova) of the journal *Bŭlgarski folklor* [Vol. 26/3, 2000: 43-51]. We wish to express our gratitude to Prof. Norman W. Ingham, Prof. Bill Darden, Prof. Paul Friedrich, and Prof. James Fernandez for their valuable comments and suggestions.
- 2 An excellent survey of the polemics surrounding the term “popular religion” is O’Neil [1986]. For a well compiled bibliography of studies in popular religion, see Dinzelbacher [1990]; cf. Wilson [1983], where a specialized bibliography on the cult of saints is provided. Pioneer anthropological studies of Christian folk saints include articles by Romano [1965] and Macklin and Crumrine [1973], dealing with Latin American material, and Christian Jr. [1973], based on Western European cults. More important subsequent contributions in the field are the book by Best [1983], the symposium papers on saints and near-saints edited by Macklin and Margolies [1988], and the case studies of Padre Cícero Romão Batista (1844-1934, Brazil) by Slater [1986], Fray Leopoldo de Alpanseire (1864-1956, Spain) by Slater [1990], and Padre Pio da Pietralcina (1887-1968, Italy) by McKevitt [1991a and 1991b].
- 3 See Izmirlieva and Ivanov [1991b]; cf. also the short descriptions of Bona Velinova and Vanga Dimitrova in notes 14 and 16 below. On similar cases among other Balkan peoples see Kazimirović [1940: 457-526], Pavlović [1965: 209-53] and Blum [1970: 48-51, 62-63]. The only short description of near-saint phenomena from the Balkan Slavic region hitherto available in English is information about the holy woman of Retchane (first half of the 20th century) given in Obrebski [1977: 16-17].
- 4 Cf. similar observations in Woodward [1990: 17], who claims that, canonically speaking, a living saint is “a contradiction in terms,” since the Christian Church considers the death of the holy person as a *conditio sine qua non* for canonization.

- 5 The material on which the following description is based was collected 1985-2001 by the authors, initially with the support of the Institute of Folklore at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Department of Old Bulgarian Literature at St. Climent of Ohrida University in Sofia. Our informants are mainly from Zlatolist, a small mountainous village in South Western Bulgaria, close to the ancient towns of Melnik and Petrich [for a description of the region see Gibbons 1980]. The village is more popularly known by its old name (Dolna) Sushitsa, which was in official use until 1951. Part of the recorded material and two versions of Stoina's vita were published in the journal Bŭlgarski folklor [Izmirlieva and Ivanov 1990; 1991a].
- 6 In another variant Stoina lost her sight in a whirlwind. According to folk belief, the souls of the dead or of *samovili* [wood-nymphs] spin in a whirlwind. They not only cause blindness to whomsoever they manage to take away, but also endow him or her with clairvoyant abilities [see Kolev 1980: 78-79].
- 7 The source material about the events of 1913 directly concerning the region of Sérrai were published in English by Anastasoff [1977: 308-14].
- 8 This interpretation is included in the most common Bulgarian folk terms for the phenomenon: *prenasiane* "the act of crossing or being carried across a barrier," and *primirane* "the state of being dead for a while" vs. *umirane* "the act of dying." On Bulgarian near-death folklore see Marinov [1981: 274-75, 322]. A wide-ranging and detailed picture of similar East Slavic materials is provided by Bilij [1930]; for observations on the "genre" of "visits to the Other World" as presented in folk texts from Poles'e, see Tolstoi and Tolstaia [1979]. A good cross-cultural study on the subject is Zaleski [1987].
- 9 See Georgieva and Garnizov [1989: 117]. Presenting the world of the dead as a "village, where God is the local mayor" [Slaveikoff 1904: 51] is also typical of other folk texts (songs, fairy-tales, etc.). More broadly, the vision of the Other World, as documented in near-death accounts, fits the heterogeneous picture of life after death constructed in folk ballads (especially the motif, "a sacred person visits the dead" [see Vranska 1940: 172-83]), as well as a corpus of religious eschatological texts (apocrypha, *Visionsliteratur*, the iconography of the Last Judgment, etc. [see Matl 1971]).
- 10 The interpretation of saints as "very special personae" is suggested by Peter Brown's [1981] concept of canonized saints as "the very special dead" of the Christian Church, as well as by Blum's [1970] notion, "the extraordinary dead" from his ethnography of Greek "rural religion." We unpack the rich implications of Brown's concept by applying it to living saints and introducing the term "the very special living."
- 11 At the tomb of St. Naum in Ohrid, for example, such practice has been registered since the early 19th century [Grigorovich 1915: 152].
- 12 The ancient roots of this practice are discussed by Katsarov [1933: 195].
- 13 For the contemporary oral and written tradition of these texts among the Balkan Slavs see Kretzenbacher [1975] and Badalanova [1993].

- 14 See, for example, the commentary of Theodoros Balsamon († after 1195) to canon 63 of the Quini-Sext (Trullan) Ecumenical Council: “His Holiness, Lord Patriarch Nicolaus Muzalon, as he found the vita of St. Paraskeva who was worshipped at the village of Kalikratia, a vita written by a peasant ignorantly and unworthy of the angel-like life of the saint, ordered it to be committed to the flames and assigned the task to deacon Basilic of writing her vita in a manner pleasing to God.” [Balsamon 1865: 733c].
- 15 Another example of an institutionalized cult is that of Bona Velinova (1882-1960), the professional prophet of the religious movement “The Good Samaritan,” which was extremely popular in Bulgaria between 1925 and 1944. The movement had its own newspaper, published numerous books and had organizations throughout the country [see Izmirlieva and Ivanov 1991b: 7].
- 16 In the newspaper Demokratsia No. 1549, Mar. 8, 1995, p. 8. cf. Dneven Trud No. 92, Mar. 2, 1995, p. 2; Standart No. 976, June 4, 1995, p. 33. In the autumn of 2002 the Bulgarian TV channels “SKAT” and “2001” broadcast a 25 minute documentary about the Venerable Stoina followed by a studio discussion led by the journalist Antonina Topalova. For an argument against Stoina’s cult, see Tsurkoven Vestnik No. 23, Dec. 1, 2001, also available at [http://web.hit.bg/CV102/23-yyyy/prepodobna\\_stoina.htm](http://web.hit.bg/CV102/23-yyyy/prepodobna_stoina.htm).
- 17 The successor to Stoina in the region is Vanga Dimitrova (1911-1996), the blind oracle from Petrich who is the most famous contemporary Bulgarian *vrachka* [see Ostrander and Schroeder 1970; Perkowski 1995; Valtchinova 1998; Iliev 2000]. The biography and powers of Vanga and Stoina are strikingly similar, and the stories about their call and the circumstances under which they became blind are completely identical. The two women are presented by our informants as congruent patrons of the community and related by spiritual kinship. Vanga seems to approve of these analogies, since she is actively involved in the creation of Stoina’s cult. The linking of the *vrachka* from Petrich with the saint of Sushitsa in the popular mind and in folk discourse is even more significant when set against the rather different socio-political forms of their practice. While Stoina’s activities were always Christian in their external manifestations, Vanga never openly committed herself to any religion. Moreover, her activities were supported by the state, and she was used by the communist élite, including Todor Zhivkov’s family [see Sokoloff 1990 and Kinzer 1995].
- 18 In the rich Bulgarian folk nomenclature for religious and quasi-religious specialists [see Marinov 1981: 339-47 and Conrad 1987: 559] the generic term is *vrach* (and especially its feminine counterpart *vrachka*), which implies both curative abilities and extrasensory perception. For more information about folk-doctors in the Balkans, see Kemp [1935: 205-28].
- 19 The most popular ritual for choosing a patron saint is *khvashtane na svetets* [literally “the catching of a saint”]. Several candles named for the candidate saints are lit and whichever burns the longest, that person is then proclaimed the patron saint, the durability of the flame being interpreted as a sign of the saint’s vitality and eagerness to become involved in the affairs of the community.

- 20 See Izmirlieva and Ivanov [1990: 83-84, No. 11; 1991a: 69-70, Nos 37 and 76, No. 65]. Similar plots are extremely popular in Bulgarian (and more broadly in Balkan) folklore. In English see the legend about St. John of Rila who “came out” of his icon to save his monastery from a Turkish invasion [Thornton 1939: 251-252].
- 21 A good illustration is the legend of how “St. George did not permit the Greeks to enter the country” during the Greek-Bulgarian border incident in 1925 [see Izmirlieva and Ivanov 1991a: 69, No. 36; the historical background to the event is given by Barros 1970].
- 22 See, for example, Vakarelski [1935: 238]. Living saints are also believed to oppose actively the censoring of their icons, because only the dead should be censored [Boiadzhieva 1993: 119].
- 23 See Markov [1907: 46-47]; cf. Uspenskii [1982: 114-16, 182-86] for parallel cases among the Eastern Slavs.
- 24 In the Bulgarian context the social unity of the living and the dead is exemplified by the ritual *kanene za praznik* [invitation to a feast]. At all important calendar or family feasts peasants invite both their living and dead relatives using analogous ritual attributes, and performing analogous ritual acts. The dead, especially those who have recently passed away, are individually invited at their graves (conceived of as their homes), and later, during the feast itself, they are assigned places next to the living at the common festive *trapeza* [the table with ritual food on it]; cf. also the custom of inviting dead relatives to weddings [Ivanova 1987: 31-32].
- 25 See Marinov [1981: 307]. A variant of being still-born is to be born at “death time,” known in Bulgaria mainly as the “unclean time” (*mrŭsni dni*; the period between Christmas and Epiphany [cf. Conrad 2001]), which is a precondition for the person to become a witch or/and turn into a vampire after death; cf. Pócs [1989: 77, note 154]. The birth of other figures in Bulgarian folk demonology is also linked to death: the plague, for example, is believed to be born of a dead mother.
- 26 Vampires are exterminated usually by professionals called *vampiradzhii* [“vampire-killers” [Beynen 1988: 458-59]; living adversaries are battered to death when caught in the act, publicly disgraced and often excommunicated.
- 27 The absence of a negative counterpart to living saints in our chart reflects the absence of a well constituted head of the adversaries in Bulgarian folk cosmology. This lacuna alone is a notable fact that raises interesting theoretical questions, which, however, go beyond the scope of our present discussion, since it is focused primarily on the cosmological status of the saintly figure.

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